

# U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE **INTERIOR**



## **ANNUAL DEPARTMENTAL REPORT ON ACCOUNTABILITY**

**FISCAL YEAR  
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## **ABOUT THE COVER**

### ***Florida Everglades***

The cover features wildlife found in the Florida Everglades: the crocodile (with her young on her back), the orchid, the woodstork, and the Florida panther. The crocodile, the woodstork and the Florida panther are listed on the Federal Endangered or Threatened Species list.

The Florida Everglades, a vast marsh covering much of southern Florida, extends south and then southwestward from the Kissimmee River through Lake Okeechobee to the Southwest Florida Shelf near the mouth of Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The Everglades is a shallow slow-flowing system often referred to as the "River of Grass" that covers approximately 18,000 square miles and averages 50 miles wide. The Everglades originated between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago at the end of the most recent Ice Age when the melting of the glaciers caused sea levels to rise, inundating the region's outlets to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico and converting the central low-lying basin into the Everglades Marsh and Big Cypress Swamp.

Today, this extraordinary ecosystem is threatened in a number of ways: large drainage projects, canals, urban growth, the diversion of water away from the Everglades, pesticide residues, and increased use of the resource by access obtained by highways built across the region. All of these factors threaten this fragile ecosystem.

These threats to the Everglades, along with the loss of habitat, have endangered the birds and animals that live there. The Everglades is home to a great variety of wildlife and provides sanctuary for 69 threatened or endangered species, among them the woodstork, the Everglades kite, crocodile, loggerhead turtle, manatee, and southern bald eagle. The Florida panther is seriously threatened because, while panthers eat mainly deer and feral hogs, they also prey on raccoons and alligators, which eat fish contaminated with mercury. The panther also requires a large home range; habitat loss poses a serious threat to this big cat.

Everglades National Park was created in 1947 in an effort to save the southern portion of the Everglades. The Park, the only subtropical preserve in North America, encompasses approximately 1.5 million acres and is the only National Park to be designated an International Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage Site, and a Wetland of International Importance. The Park, several U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuges, Biscayne National Park, and the Big Cypress National Preserve all benefit from state, tribal and federal efforts to restore the Everglades and the South Florida Ecosystem. A plan to expand the Everglades National Park is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2001.

A strong public and private partnership has been forged to address the needs of this ecosystem. In July 1999, after several years of study, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was submitted to Congress for authorization. In 2000 the Congress passed and the President signed into law legislation that authorized the CERP—making Everglades restoration a national priority. At an estimated cost of \$7.8 billion and taking over 25 years, the CERP is the largest ecosystem restoration project in the world. The Department of the Interior plays a key role in Everglades restoration in general and the CERP in particular. With over 40 percent of the lands in the ecosystem under the stewardship of its agencies, the Department is actively involved in the science, policy, and legislative requirements that are necessary to successfully complete this project. In addition, the Secretary chairs the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force. The Department's commitment, along with the partnership between other federal agencies, tribes, and the State of Florida bode well for the restoration of the Florida Everglades—a national treasure.

**Photo credits: Crocodile, orchid, and woodstork photos courtesy of the National Park Service; Florida panther photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.**

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## **Fiscal Year 2000 Annual Departmental Report on Accountability**

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